



# Bee Inspired

**A bee and a hive are part of this year's Baptist Assembly imagery as a helpful metaphor of our connectedness as Baptists Together.**

***Baptists Together* magazine spoke to beekeeper Sarah Mist to find out more about these remarkable insects**

**S**arah set up the Urban Bee-lievers social enterprise in Milton Keynes four years ago, as part of the Milton Keynes Christian Foundation. She has been a beekeeper for more than a decade, becoming besotted after taking a beekeeping class. "By week two I was completely sold," she remembers. She has since taken more courses and, having looked after thousands of honey bees through Urban Bee-lievers, her admiration has only grown. Indeed, her conversation is peppered with enthusiastic observations to underline just how much.

"The way the colony communicates with the whole entity is just insane. How do they know when to decide to swarm? How do they know when to do different jobs in the hive? Who decides?"

"It isn't the queen. Everyone thinks that, but it's a collective brain. It's just extraordinary how it all happens. In some hives during the summer, there are more than 50,000 bees."

## **A social network**

Sarah explains that a honey bee colony typically consists of three kinds of adult bees: workers (females), drones (males) and a queen. Each member has a definite task to perform to ensure the colony's survival. The several thousand worker bees cooperate in wax comb building, food collection, and brood rearing. A honeycomb is a mass of hexagonal cells built by the workers to contain their developing larvae and stores of honey and pollen. "It's not only one of the strongest shapes you can have", says Sarah, "it's slightly tilted so the honey doesn't run out. The wax pellets are made from glands on the bees' tummies."

The queen has two key roles. She lays eggs (more than 1500 a day during peak production; up to one million in her lifetime if she lives for five years). She also produces chemicals – pheromones – which serve as a social glue, unifying and helping to give individual identity to a bee colony. These chemicals, as well as communicative 'dances', are responsible for controlling the activities necessary for colony survival.

At the right time of the year the drones will fly out of the colony and join other male bees, meeting in what's known as a drone congregation area. Here they will meet and mate with the new queens.

The new queens are here because of a decision by the colony. If the colony is overcrowded, or the queen is getting older and her pheromone is not reaching all the bees, they want a new, younger queen to survive. The workers will feed a

number of eggs solely with the protein-rich royal jelly (a female, fertilised egg becomes a queen on the basis of what she's fed). The original queen will leave and take half the worker bees with her (this is a swarm). "The remaining colony knows 'all is well' because they have a store of developing queens," says Sarah. "They hope one of those will be strong enough to get mated well and come back and continue the colony."

Although this is a mere snapshot of their life, you can begin to get a sense of how surviving and thriving take the combined efforts of the entire colony, and the behaviours necessary for this to happen.

"The more you know about bees," Sarah says, "the more you realise how incredible they are."

## Why bees are vital

The crucial role colonies have on the wider environment is another aspect of the honey bee story. A significant proportion of our food is provided by bees (including solitary bumble bees) one way or another. Bees pollinate 70 types of crop - either the many vegetables and fruits we eat directly (apples, tomatoes) or the food for the animals that we then consume. An estimated one third of food we consume in the UK is pollination dependent. Commercial honeybees are considered livestock by the US Department of Agriculture because of the creatures' vital role in food production. Bees also make wax and honey - an average colony produces 14kg of honey. All this shows why the status of bees is monitored so closely, and threats to their health regularly highlighted.

'Make no mistake - bees are essential', stated the World Wildlife Fund-sponsored 2019 report 'Bees under threat from habitat loss, climate change and pesticides.' ([bit.ly/beesiege](https://bit.ly/beesiege))

## Bees and the Bible

The Revd Lorenzo L Langstroth put it another way. Langstroth's discovery of bee-space and invention of the movable frame hive in Philadelphia would revolutionise the beekeeping industry and earn him the title, 'Father of American Beekeeping'.

In his 1853 book *The Hive and the Honey Bee*, he wrote:

'The Creator may be seen in all the works of his hands; but in few more directly than in the wise economy of the Honey-Bee.'

## Beekeeper Sarah Mist of Urban Beelievers



*Geoponika*, a 10th-century Byzantine work on farming, says this:

'The bee is the wisest and cleverest of all animals and the closest to man in intelligence; its work is truly divine and of the greatest use to mankind.'

There are frequent references to bees, and particularly honey, in the Bible. Honey features more than 60 times, often used in the context of blessing, abundance and purity.

*And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey*

Exodus 3:8

*They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb.*

Psalms 19:10

*How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!*

Psalms 119:103

*Gracious words are a honeycomb, ... sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.*

Proverbs 16:24

A swarm of bees are often viewed as a prophetic occurrence. In the story of Samson, they symbolise a victorious triumph over evil:

*When he returned later to take her, he turned aside to look at the carcass of the lion; and behold, a swarm of bees and honey were in the body of the lion.*

Judges 14:8



## Urban Bee-lievers

The social enterprise Urban Bee-lievers looks after thousands of honey bees across the city in company gardens, roof tops and an urban farm. It helps create homes for bumble bees and solitary bees as well as plant flowers and trees that provide food for bees. It also runs workshops on all things honey and bee related, and produces useful and beautiful products using wax and honey. "Its vision is to help make Milton Keynes a bee friendly city", says Sarah.

Urban Bee-lievers is part of Milton Keynes Christian Foundation - an umbrella, ecumenical charity for eight social enterprises. The foundation itself was founded more than 30 years ago when Christians from different traditions sought to find new and creative ways of working with each other and the local community. Stephen Norrish, a Baptist who trained at Regent's Park College, is the Director of MK Christian Foundation. Each enterprise is staffed by young people not in education, training or employment who gain essential work experience and qualifications. They work for the enterprise for three days a week, studying maths and English. Those in charge work closely with teachers and social workers. The young people generally stay between six and 18 months, before hopefully progressing to further education, an apprenticeship or employment.

The vast majority benefit from the experience. "We often see a massive change," says Sarah. "It's hard work, but to see the young people develop social and practical skills, and grow in confidence is so worthwhile.

"Some people need to be in a different environment to school, and that's what we provide."

The Milton Keynes Christian Foundation website is clear the intention 'is not to proselytise', but 'to work in ways that express our belief in a God who is concerned for all aspects of life and particularly for hard-pressed groups in our communities.'

Sarah says the Milton Keynes Christian Foundation model is replicable, so anyone who wants to find out more is encouraged to get in touch.

"I think social enterprises like this are going to be needed more and more as young people 'fall through cracks' in our society."




**MK Christian Foundation**  
Growing people and community through social enterprise

Visit [mkchristianfoundation.co.uk/urban-beelievers](http://mkchristianfoundation.co.uk/urban-beelievers) to find out more or buy some of Urban Bee-lievers products like lip balms and beeswax wraps.

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## Bee supportive – tips on helping your honey bees

- **O**ne of the best ways of supporting bee populations is to grow bee friendly flowers and plants. “We don’t need more hives, but more flowers to provide food for the bees we already have,” says Sarah.
- **K**eep weeds such as dandelion and forget-me-nots as they are a great source of nectar and pollen
- **B**uy honey from local beekeepers (there are lots of health benefits – and it tastes delicious!)



CONVERSATION

What part do I play in the body of believers?

What ‘honey’ does my church community produce?

STARTERS



Sarah Mist has been working in the charity sector for over 20 years and fell in love with honey bees 12 years ago. With her husband Arthur she enjoys growing vegetables on their allotment and then cooking up a feast for friends and family using the allotment harvest. She is actively involved with the local C of E church community